

**Mirjam Gebauer****Richard Maxwell, Jon Raundalen & Nina Lager Vestberg (eds.):  
*Media and the Ecological Crisis.*  
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The imperceptibility of media devices is often seen as something positive. A tablet computer is supposed to make us forget that it is there, instead providing seemingly immediate access to the content. However, the anthology *Media and the Ecological Crisis* makes it clear that this invisibility goes hand in hand with a problematic blind spot concerning the environmental impact of media technology and thus highlights a rather gloomy side of the revolution in media technology.

In the introduction, the editors discuss the influential concept of “media ecology”. This “environmental metaphor” (xii) initially proved productive in media studies by postulating an “organic, interactive and complex” (xii) relationship between technology and culture. However, the parallel between media and eco-systems was accompanied by suppression of the fact that media systems build on living systems and affect them in return. In fact, the “nexus of scientific advances, technological developments, labor, capital, policy, and political and economic conditions” (xii) has led to a situation in which the production and use of media technologies has “increasingly noxious effects on land, air, and water” (xiii) and where “e-waste is now the fastest growing part of urban waste-streams” (xiii). This reality contrasts harshly with the “faith in the prospects of ICT inaugurating a social revolution” (xiii) which dominated the last decades. The contributors to this two-part volume set out to establish a “new media ecology” which is “committed to the materialist approach” (xiii). The contributions in the first part, entitled “New Media Materialism”, elaborate on the

material dimension of the media, and it is on this basis that the second part, entitled “New Media Ecology”, establishes a new environmentally-informed paradigm of media studies.

In the first chapter of the first part, “Powering the Digital: From Energy Ecologies to Electronic Environmentalism”, Jennifer Gabrys broadens the material approach: she introduces the notion that “*materiality as process*” can supplement life-cycle analysis by analysing “the relations, practices, and inhabitations that are put in place through these material arrangements”. This includes aspects such as “our contemporary material cultures of technological fascination, repetitive cycles of consumption, built-in obsolescence, poor resource use, and labor inequalities” (6). Gabrys considers the example of energy monitors; these “smart meters” are supposed to help to generate energy efficiency and sustainability but “do little to change energy practices toward lessening overall greenhouse gas emissions” (14).

The second chapter is “Immaterial Culture? The (Un)Sustainability of Screens”. Here, Paul Micklethwaite explores the common idea “that it is better to do it on-screen, whatever it may be” (19). Among other examples, he considers Computer Aided Design (CAD) used by architects and concludes that one of the advantages of the digitalisation of work processes is its potential to make designing and manufacturing more sustainable. Whether or not this potential is realized depends on the way in which devices are used, and the second part of the article considers practicable advice on how to make our use of screens more environmentally friendly.

In “Damaged Nature: The Media Ecology of Auto-destructive Art”, Synnøve Marie Vik deals with how the theory and practice of auto-destructive art can contribute to discussions of the environmental impact of media. Drawing on the notion of mediality and Jacques Rancière’s sensory milieu, Vik looks at the art practice of Gustav Metzger, who was active from the 1960s and whose art works included painting performances with acid, which caused the canvasses to disintegrate after a short period of time. These destructive processes were often documented on video or in photographs and were included in museum collections. Vik argues that Metzger’s works “implicate an ethics of mediality” (48).

In “Documenting Depletion: Of Algorithmic Machines, Experience Streams, and Plastic People”, Soenke Zehle asks how the new environments and circumstances in which we find ourselves can be grasped and represented by means of documentary strategies. For this purpose, he considers documentary aesthetics “not as a realism but rather as a ‘relationalism’ engaging the proliferation of dynamic material objects” (53). For instance, Zehle considers the example of Noël Burch and Allan Sekula’s documentary *The Forgotten Space*, which “focuses on the materialities of maritime trade to counter the myths of a weightless economy” (56f.), making visible “the depletion of work” (57).

In “E-waste, Human-waste, Inflation”, Sophia Kaitatzi-Whitlock considers the economic, social and ecological consequences of the network society on three levels: “mounting e-waste deposits and the challenge of their safe management”; “a new alarming ICT-derivative socioeconomic threat”, namely “unemployment generating growth”; and

what she calls the “disease of infoflation” (69). These three developments leave society in a state of economic instability and social insecurity, as the “*social contract* that held society and economy together, during the industrial era, has imploded, but nothing emerges in its place” (82).

In the first chapter of the second part, “Greening Media Studies”, Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller address the proposition that the “eco-crisis challenges the foundations of media studies” (87). However, until now environmental issues have occupied a marginal space in the discipline, and the very physical basis of the media and its environmental impacts are not part of curricula which mostly focus on the human mind. One example is the discipline of “media archeology”, which “remains anchored to methodological and conceptual limitations of the humanities” (91). Maxwell and Miller suggest that this “approach could be modified to include the ecology story of our technological past” (91).

In his chapter “Tech Support: How Technological Utopianism in the Media Is Driving Consumption”, Jon Raundalen asks why journalism often fails to educate readers about the environmental impact of media devices. Analyzing how Norwegian, German and British newspapers write about technological innovations in the new media and why they do so, Raundalen has conducted a case study focusing on the Internationale Funkausstellung (IFA). He concludes that in the struggle of newspapers for survival, consumer-oriented journalism “proved to be effective against the decline in sales figures” and “appealed to advertisers” (109). As newspaper offices were reduced, “a greater dependence on pre-packaged information” (111) was created.

In “Where Did Nature Go? Is the Ecological Crisis Perceptible within the Current Theoretical Frameworks of Journalism Research?”, Roy Krøvel suggests that journalism and media studies have drawn somewhat uncritically on the assumptions of post-structuralism and social constructivism, making it possible to ask whether global warming exists “independent of the discourse that called it global warming” (126). However, Krøvel shows that the theoretical traditions related to names such as Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari involve “criticizing matters of fact”, but not “moving away from them” (128). Advocating the position of critical realism, Krøvel also suggests that Guattari’s “three ecologies” and other ecological approaches can inform contemporary media and journalist studies, thus making it possible to address environmental issues within these fields.

Climate communication in the African media is Ibrahim Saleh’s topic in the chapter, “Narrating the Climate Crisis in Africa: The Press, Social Imaginaries, and Harsh Realities”. Africa’s carbon dioxide emissions of 3-4 percent seem insignificant. Nevertheless, the continent is one of the areas which are strongly affected by climate change. Saleh analyzes Egyptian and South African press coverage of the 2013 COP 19 in Warsaw, concluding “that news coverage of climate change politics is more influential than scientific reports on the real-world problem of the climate crisis” (147). The press leans on “imported foreign narratives”, with the consequence that “the media’s equivocation about the ecological crisis reinforces a social tendency to deny the urgency of the crisis” (148).

In the last chapter, “Putting the Eco into Media Ecosystems: Bridging Media Practice with Green Cultural Citizenship”, Antonio López suggests that “we need to transform our mental models from mechanism to something related to systems thinking and ecological intelligence” (158). López considers the media as tools which can be used either to become part of the problem or part of the solution. He suggests the agricultural metaphors of monoculture and permaculture to characterize different media practices; the first representing a media practice which implies monopolization, the second a media practice which implies democratization and environmentally ethical ways. In this volume, readers will not only find many important facts and figures which map the environmental impact of the media, but also an account of how these conditions are imbedded in the overall economic system and which global-level social inequalities result from these conditions. The inclusion of historical perspectives, questions of aesthetical representation and art theory in some of the contributions helps to deepen the understanding of the topic. Even though many different facets of the subject are unfolded, a strong focus is maintained in the volume by the recurring discussion of central concepts such as media ecology. In this way, the anthology represents an important and timely contribution to a pressing subject in the humanities in general and in media and journalist studies in particular.

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